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The Trump Presidency, Episode 1: Simulating Sovereignty

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On January 15, 2017, the Scottish newspaper *The Sunday Herald* ran its regular column in the TV section, 'Damien Love's Weekly Highlights' (Love, 2017). Among the must-see programs listed was 'President Trump: The Inauguration', which Love described like this:

After a long absence, *The Twilight Zone* returns with one of the most ambitious, expensive and controversial productions in broadcast history. Sci-fi writers have dabbled often with alternative history stories – among the most common is the “What If The Nazis Had Won The Second World War” setting – but this huge interactive virtual reality project, which will unfold on TV, in the press, and on Twitter over the next four years, sets out to build an ongoing alternative present. The story begins in a nightmarish version of 2017 in which huge sections of the US electorate have somehow been duped into voting to make Donald Trump president. It sounds far-fetched, and it is, but as it goes on it becomes more and more chillingly plausible. Today's feature-length opener concentrates on the gaudy inauguration of President Trump, and the stirrings of protest and despair surrounding the ceremony, while pundits speculate gravely on what lies ahead. It's a flawed piece, but a disturbing glimpse of the horrors we could stumble into, if we're not careful.

Even viewed through Love's description of it as simulated if surreal reality, the inauguration made for cringe-worthy viewing. President Trump pledged to 'Make America Great Again!' by putting 'America First' on behalf of his 'righteous people' and 'righteous public'. The righteous, we knew from teasers during the campaign, were generally white, US-born, Anglo, Christian, heteronormative, cisnormative, able-bodied men and woman who had been groomed to respect striding masculine forms of white authoritarian leadership more than the 'rigged' democratic process (for details on their figuration, see Weber, 2016a; for a study of the authoritarian leanings of Trump supporters, see McWilliams, 2016). Trump's speech treated them to a plethora of proto-Fascist proclamations. 'We share one heart, one home, and one glorious destiny'. 'At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America'. 'When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice'. 'We must speak our minds openly, debate our disagreements honestly, but always pursue solidarity'. Trump's America First agenda promised 'the righteous' prosperity and security, by 'bringing back our borders', 'unit[ing] the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism' and following two simple rules, 'Buy American and hire American' (Trump, 2017a).

This pilot episode seamlessly segued into a regular series, *The Trump Presidency*. Viewers who wondered if the promised spectacle of horrors outlined in Trump's campaign and fashioned into his America First inaugural address would materialize soon had their answer.

In President Trump's first 100 minutes, he not only gave the most populist, nationalist, isolationist speech in US history. He signed off on the appointments of

his yet-to-be-confirmed Cabinet members, who collectively embodied homo/trans*phobic, anti-black, anti-Muslim, anti-women, anti-environmental and pro-capitalist views and who were widely described as amongst the least expert, least experienced and most contentious appointments to any US Cabinet. At the same time, Trump's whitehouse.gov website went live. It celebrated the victory of America's self-proclaimed great leader of 'the righteous' Donald J. Trump and the business prowess of their new First Lady Melania Trump (since deleted, but see Snell, 2017), while deleting those pages the Obama administration had devoted to 'the unrighteous' and their causes. The disabilities page was gone. The indigenous Americans page was gone. The civil rights page was gone. The LGBT page was gone. And the climate change page was gone, replaced with a promise to drill for oil on federal lands (whitehouse.gov).

In his first three weeks, President Trump began to implement his agenda through executive orders and presidential memoranda. These included his Muslim Ban on citizens from seven Muslim-majority states entering the US (Office of the US Press Secretary, 2017a) and his reinstatement of the Global Gag Order which defunded any NGO that counseled women about abortions or performed abortions, while extending this order to include the work of any US department or agency performing these tasks (Office of the US Press Secretary, 2017b).

While these scenes played out on screens across the US, so too did setbacks for the Trump administration, in the form of peaceful and violent street protests, fight-backs in Town Hall meetings against government officials who did not use their positions to oppose Trump's policies, and court orders suspending Trump's Muslim Ban.

All this suggests that Damien Love is right. US Americans are living in *The Twilight Zone* thanks to Trump's Presidency, where they are experiencing 'a disturbing glimpse of the horrors' the US and the world have stumbled into.

And yet there are reasons to dispute Love's depiction. And it is worth disputing. Even though it is but the musings of a journalist about a television listing, Love's account went viral, garnered praise from many who oppose the Trump administration, and captured the sense of shock and surprise that many felt when the election results came in and Donald J. Trump was inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States. Yet as clever as it is in articulating how what takes place on screen horrifically seeps into our material lives, Love's depiction does not adequately prepare us to understand the Trump Presidency, how we got here, or what to do about it now that we are here. To be fair, this was not Love's charge, but it is ours. Taking that charge seriously, I want to suggest three reasons why we need to think through but also think beyond Love's account. First, Love's account obscures the historical conditions that gave rise to Trump. Second, it glosses over the specific form Trump's simulated 'experiment' takes. And, third, it does not specify that what Trump is simulating is a complex form of sovereignty that is already having material effects in the world and that might too readily capture our imagination about what form our resistances to Trump should take.

First, Love seems to have tuned into the historical moment he describes far too late. In so doing, he presents the Trump moment as if it were without history and without context, as a horrible surprise that is just now unfolding. Love misses how Trump's

campaign and presidency are part and parcel of earlier historical ‘experiments’ – in white, Western, heteropatriarchal authoritarian leadership (Adorno et al, 1950; Connolly, 2016), in neoliberalism (Bauman, 2016) and the [specific modalities of citizenship, governance and reason](#) by which it governs (Brown, 2003), in the simulated presidency of Ronald Reagan, of which Trump’s presidency is a spin-off and from which Trump draws some of his policies and tactics (Rogan, 1998; Rubenstein, 1991, 2008; Weber, 1995a and b, 1999), and in Trump’s own historical association with ‘the big lie’ (Connolly, 2017) that grounds his long-standing sexualized anti-black politics. These politics date back not just to Trump’s ‘Birther lie’ about President Obama but to Trump’s ‘Central Park lie’ about young black men wrongly accused of rape (Laughland, 2016). As President, Trump continues to be a serial liar who incessantly repeats lies big and small. He does so to the point that empirical facts and judicial judgments that contradict Trumps’ lies – about crowd size, voter fraud, murder rates, the vetting of immigrants, the ‘terrorist threat’ of travellers covered by his Muslim Ban, and his team’s contacts with Russian officials before the inauguration (Whitworth, 2017) – seem to many in his base to be not only incorrect but dishonest to the point of being conspiratorial. All of this may well sustain (un)reasonable identifications with Trump of the kind José Ortega y Gasset (1950) described in 1920s Europe.

Love also obscures the recent history of candidate Trump, especially regarding Trump’s relationship with the media. On the one hand, Love captures how an ‘alternative present’ in which Trump is President will (in part) ‘unfold on TV, in the press, and on Twitter’ (2017). But Love fails to mark both how this mediated ‘alternative present’ has long been in production and how the Trump-media relationship functioned differently during the Trump campaign than it does during the Trump presidency. For example, by suggesting that the US public ‘has somehow been dubbed’ into voting for Trump, Love obscures the mediatic ‘pre-history’ to Trump’s inauguration. He overlooks how the US media ceaselessly screened what many journalists and pundits regarded as a ratings-grabbing joke of a candidate who was an unimaginable president, until the joke was on all of us. Love also obscures how especially since his election, Trump has been shutting down the very journalists who aired him during the campaign, threatening the principle of a free press, and how the media have yet to offer a collective, sustained fightback to Trump’s maneuvers.

These histories point to the starkly different relationships Trump has had with the media pre- and post-election and the stakes of these relationships. Pre-election, many in the US press helped transform candidate Trump from fiction into fact. Post-election, President Trump and his administration are busily trying to transform those in the press who attempt to hold Trump accountable from fact into fiction. What this means is that we need to think beyond Love’s account of the Trump presidency as a surreal spilling over from screen to ‘alternative present’ by taking seriously the strikingly different relationship between the press and the president in this ‘alternative present’.

Second, Love’s account glosses over the specific form Trump’s simulated ‘experiment’ takes. It is less like a surreal *Twilight Zone* series unfolding episode by episode, event by event than it at first may appear to be. Instead, Trump’s simulated form is more akin to Alain Badiou’s description of the function of the simulacrum under Nazism, in which a hyperreal national allegiance to the self-referential

simulacrum as heteropatriarchal leader piles specific fictions upon fictions. It does so not only to mask what Baudrillard (1983) calls the absence of the reality principle but to generate a dangerous, materializable, national fantasy that depends upon particularizing, identifying and regulating abstract allies and enemies. As Badiou put it, "fidelity to a simulacrum, unlike fidelity to an event, regulates its break with the situation not by the universality of the void, but by the closed particularity of an abstract set ... (the "Germans" or the "Aryans")' (2001:74). Substitute the simulacrum Trump for Nazism, and substitute the abstract sets 'US Americans' or 'righteous US Americans' for the abstract sets 'Germans' or 'Aryans', and you can begin to see how Badiou's account works in Trump's America First 'experiment'.

Finally, Love does not specify what it is that Trump is simulating and what the effects of his simulated 'experiment' might be. Presidential power, yes. Horror, yes. But Love gives us nothing more specific than this. This is because Love's is a story about the form of Trump's presidency as a mediated virtual or simulated reality experiment. Our stories, in contrast, must be about the content as well as the forms of Trump's simulation. Our stories must specify what allowed Trump to rise to mediated fame (e.g., see Weber, 2016a) and what allows Trump to (attempt to) exercise messianic, authoritarian power. There are many such stories to tell. One of them is about the specific ways Trump simulates sovereignty.

Sovereignty as a concept, a logic and a performative practice (Weber, 1998) functions in many registers, often at the same time. Simulating sovereignty is nothing new, as it has been employed by many political leaders, including US presidents, in various forms for decades (Rogin, 1988; Rubenstein, 1991, 2008; Weber, 1995a and b, 1999). As the various logics of sovereignty are employed by the Trump administration, they mix moments of (what appear to be) representation, simulation and dissimulation to solidify the administration's authoritarian claim to power.

Representational logics were used by Trump during the campaign to construct his supporters as the US sovereign subjects in whose name he ought to govern. We saw this in how, for example, the Trump campaign employed what Richard Ashley (1989) calls 'statecraft as mancraft' and what (appear to be) what I call 'queer logics of statecraft' (Weber, 2016b) to figure mainly white, US-born, Anglo, Christian, heteronormative, able-bodied, authoritarian-inclined US citizens into the voting base in whose name he promised to govern. Since taking office, Trump has equated these particular US Americans to those 'righteous Americans' who are the sovereign subjects in whose name he does govern. And he opposes the 'righteous' to the 'unrighteous', who he variously named during the campaign as all or many of 'the blacks', 'the gays', 'the Mexican rapists' and the 'radical Islamic terrorists'. So when President Trump announced in his inauguration address, 'What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. Jan. 20, 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again,' there can be no mistaking who these 'forgotten men and women of our country' who have become 'the rulers of this nation again' are, who they are not, and who is empowered and made most vulnerable by them (Trump, 2017a).

Trump's representations of sovereignty accept that there is a sovereign subjectivity and that he is the sovereign who rules on its behalf. What is a matter of political

contestation for those who support or oppose Trump is how sovereign subjectivities and sovereign powers are produced, intertwined, and circulated in order to make Trump's particular form of governance (im)possible.

Simulation and dissimulation make different assumptions and therefore ask slightly different political questions. Neither accepts that it is possible to ever arrive at a truthful or even false sovereign subjectivity or sovereign power because both logics contend that the distinction between what is true and what is false – what is real and what is unreal – is no longer guaranteed by the reality principle which representational logics depend upon.

Simulation concerns itself with how signs of the real are circulated to mask the absence of the reality principle, in this case some foundational sovereign subjectivity. Dissimulation concerns itself with how signs of the fake are circulated for the same purpose (Baudrillard, 1983; as applied to sovereignty, see Weber, 1995a and b). What is a matter of political contestation in logics of simulation and dissimulation is how sovereign subjectivities and sovereign powers are (dis)simulated as 'true' or 'false' effects (as hyperreal or hyperfake), how they are intertwined, and how they are circulated in order to make a particular form of governance (im)possible. How sovereignty is (dis)simulated is also vitally important to those who support or oppose Trump.

One way Trump simulates sovereignty is through his circulation of hyperreal signs of his ability and often his ability alone to deliver what he defines as truly in the US national interest. For example, in his inaugural address, Trump promised 'the righteous', 'I will fight for you with every breathe in my body, and I will never, ever let you down. American will start winning again, winning like never before' (2017a). What it means to win is to 'Make American Great Again!', in an echo of Ronald Reagan's campaign slogan 'Let's make America Great Again', but rewritten as a hyperbolic command from an authoritarian leader to followers that always includes the exclamation point. The numerous executive orders and presidential memoranda Trump has authorized since becoming president circulate as hyperreal signs of Trump delivering on his democratic (electoral college) mandate, to cover over the fact that Trump has so far governed by autocratic decree.

One of the ways Trump dissimulates sovereignty is through his dissemination of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' that find ground with some as 'real news'. This happens not just when Trump tells bold-faced lies or when he labels CNN fake news or quips censoriously about the BBC, 'BBC news. That's another beauty' (Federal News Service, 2017). It happens when he calls the Muslim Ban a Travel Ban or not a ban at all, when he dismisses his brags of sexually assaulting women as 'locker room talk', when he undermines the judiciary and then threatens, 'SEE YOU IN COURT' (Trump, 2017b), when his team talks about 'alt-right' instead of white supremacy, and when he incessantly claims his governing principle is to put the national interest above his personal interests but does precisely the opposite (Venook, 2017).

The effect of Trump's strategies is not (only) to simulate or dissimulate sovereignty into oblivion, by turning it into a meaningless reversibility that breaks the system of sovereignty itself (Baudrillard, 1983). Instead (and also), Trump and his administration use their (dis)simulations to recode sovereignty, to dislodge it from

any requirement to abide by US democratic norms, institutions and values, to assign authority exclusively to the Trump Presidency and demand total allegiance to him (as when Trump's Senior Advisor Stephen Miller suggested, 'the powers of the president to protect our country are very substantial and will not be questioned'; Redden, 2017), to degrade long-standing international alliances and agreements, to embrace (primarily white and white supremacist) authoritarians within (Steve Bannon, Stephen Miller) and beyond (Russia's Vladimir Putin) US borders, to authorize 'dissimulated interventions' (Weber, 1995b) at every scale from the personal to the planetary, and to do so in the name of that particular abstract set of sovereign US subjects on whose behalf the administration (pretends to) claim(s) its authority to rule – 'righteous Americans'.

How Trump represents, simulates, and dissimulates sovereignty matters for four primary reasons.

First, more than any President in living memory, Trump's maneuvers are wrong-footings his opponents, silencing many of those who should be holding him to account, emboldening those who support him, and increasing the vulnerability of the precarious. We have to understand the operations of his operations of power if we are going to undo them rather than be distracted by their every iteration.

Second, Trump's campaigning and governing styles ought to dispel the often-held assumption that simulation and/or dissimulation are not serious political tactics because they do materialize in the world in ways that differently affect us all. On the contrary, simulating and dissimulating authoritarian rule is central to how Trump governs. His brand of authoritarian rule is no joke. It is not something we can smugly dismiss or wish away. It is something we need to take very seriously because it is already killing people.

Third, even though Trump's tactics are (somewhat) effective at the moment, this does not mean that those of us who oppose Trump ought to wallow in feelings of political futility. It does not mean that – with or without a reality principle intact – Trump and his administration cannot be opposed, cannot be held in check, cannot be held accountable or cannot be removed from power. It does not mean that we cannot find effective leverage in democratic practices and institutions, in what we envision as American values, in calling out Trump's lies. Rather, making our efforts to oppose Trump feel futile is part of Trump's strategy – a strategy that attempts to overwhelm US democracy with Trump's representations, simulations and dissimulations of facts and fictions, so all that remains intact is the authority of Trump and Trump as our authoritarian leader. Identifying how Trump mobilizes (apparent) representation, simulation and dissimulation to further his agenda and to quell resistances to it is the first step in recovering historical tactics to opposed simulated (proto-)Fascism and to creating new ones that will be most effective during this specific historical moment.

Finally, it is important to remember that Trump is not starring in a simulated if surreal TV show. He is simulating sovereignty as the President of the United States. Trump's simulations of sovereignty might be strengthening him now, but they will likely catch him out later. For as Joan Cock (2014) reminds us, sovereignty is 'a political delusion' which promises freedom through a particular set of authoritative arrangements that ultimately fail us (as well as the planet), either as claims and

practices by which sovereign nation-states are governed or as claims and practices by which sovereign nation-states are opposed. This means it will not be enough for those of us who oppose Trump to fight his sovereign maneuvers with our own (although, I think that will be an element of our struggles). But neither will Trump's sovereign maneuvers be enough to sustain his power.

Hope lies not in tuning out and turning off The Trump Presidency. It lies in watching it closely, understanding what makes it popular, and recovering, devising and enacting strategies to get it cancelled as soon as possible (e.g., see Fox Piven, 2017). It is, after all, (still) an interactive production. We cannot take for granted that it will remain one.

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